

Connecticut Alliance of YMCAs

Testimony before the Select Committee on Children

HB 5146 – Concerning Criminal Background Checks of camp employees who transport children with special needs.

HB 5199 – Concerning Criminal Background Checks of camp employees.

My name is Kristen Pollard. I am the Senior Program Director of the New Britain-Berlin YMCA and am responsible for hiring summer and holiday camp staff. However, I appear today on behalf of the CT Alliance of twenty four YMCAs in support of the fundamental idea behind House Bills 5146 and 5199 concerning the requirement of background checks for camp staff. It is considered a best practice at the YMCA.

In communities, large and small, across the State, fifty-six different YMCA facilities serve the needs of their members and their communities through quality, safe camp programs. Many times these programs are used by families of working parents seeking child care when school is out of session. These YMCAs operate wholesome program activities that help build strong kids, strong families and strong communities. It is vital that the community at large recognize the need to ensure the safety and well being of our youth, especially those with special needs. Thus, we applaud the sponsors of house bill 5146, Rep. Mary Mushinsky and HB 5199, Rep. Larry Cafero. Both are friends of the YMCA and support our effort to deliver cost effective, quality services to youth and families throughout the state.

Consider that, collectively, YMCAs are the state's largest provider of organized camping and indeed it was the YMCA that founded the first continuously used camp. YMCAs became involved in camping in the 1860s, when a Vermont Y's youth director took a group of boys to Lake Champlain for a summer encampment. In 1881, the Brooklyn (N.Y.) YMCA reported taking 30 boys on a campout. Many other YMCAs had camp experiences for youth as well. The oldest camp, now known as Camp Dudley, began in 1886 on Lake Champlain, NY. In Connecticut, close to thirty thousand youth register for summer camp each year at the YMCA. So we know something about caring for children in a camping program.

Parents entrust their child to YMCA camps and expect the same level of care and attention in the hiring of camp staff, as parents who enroll in YMCA child care programs. Thus, it makes sense to require background checks for summer camp employees. However, there are some differences you need to consider.

- First, these are truly seasonal employees, and thus their paperwork and employment application forms always come together in a concentrated time period and thus turn-a-round time on background checks is critical.
- Second, most of the staff are considerably younger than child care staff. Thus, the committee should consider whether background checks should be conducted on ALL camp staff, regardless of age. Here, the YMCA of the USA's recommended best practice is that age 16 is the minimum age for background checks. YUSA has come to this recommendation based on the following: 39 states and the District of Columbia consider age 16 to be the age of consent. Minors 16 years of age and older can frequently be treated as adults in criminal proceedings. Realistically, however, records of those under 18 are frequently not made available.

- Third, there are two bills under consideration by this committee on very similar subjects, one requires a state background check, while the other directs that a national background check be used. The YMCA, due to the mobility of people and families today, believes a national background check process is preferred. Although states have free Sex Offender Registry checks, that search is only being conducted in the state. National background check services check Offender Registries, criminal history, jail history, and other reporting groups. This broader check gives the YMCA the opportunity to obtain possible convictions that occurred outside the state where the person currently resides. Also, not all offenders are actually registered as they are supposed to be.

I will conclude my testimony by repeating – the CT Alliance of YMCAs believes this is a good idea. However, we, like all not-for-profit institutions are experiencing economic trauma. Any legislation that increases the cost of service will naturally have a negative impact on the YMCAs ability to deliver services and to provide financial aid and program subsidies to families in need of help. The fiscal impact on not-for-profits should also be considered when finalizing this legislation.

Thank you for listening to my remarks. I, and my colleagues Richard Ward and Denise Learned will be available to answer questions, but may I suggest that they make their remarks, and then questions could be directed to all of us.

For more information on this topic, contact:

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